Letter from the Abbey

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Dear John,
It was truly great to see you yesterday here at the Abbey. It was grand of you to make the time in your busy schedule to "retreat" to this special place with me. I really value your friendship. I will long remember our sitting together all afternoon on the porch of Bethany House, looking out over Mirror Pond and talking. What a luxury! I know the past few months since your father died have been hard for you, and I appreciate your coming here to share your stories of his life and his death.

At one point yesterday, you asked me why I was here again. As you know, I've come to this beautiful place for a week of retreat every spring for the last, oh, 17 years now. Because we got to talking about other things and I never really answered your question, I thought I'd write you today to explain why I schedule this time each year.

Let me begin my explanation with an extended metaphor of sorts.

Some time ago, while driving around San Francisco, I came up behind an unusual vehicle. After following it for a few blocks, I realized it was a prototype of a solar-powered car. I began thinking first about my own car and then about my own energy.

My gasoline-powered car works on the principle of combustion, burning up gas to create energy. It runs by depleting its source of energy. I take my car out of the garage each morning with a tankful of gas, but as I drive around all day doing the things that need to be done, I gradually use up almost all of it until, at the end of the day, I am "running on empty." At night, I am forced to stop at the corner gas station to fill it up before starting off for work again.

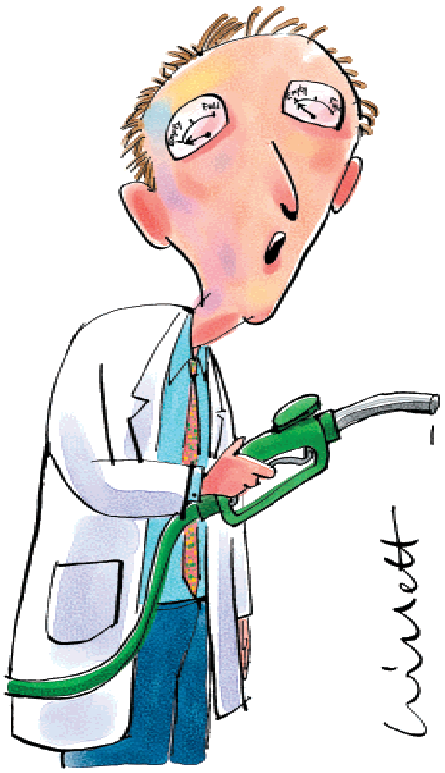
Much of the time, as a physician, I operate like a gasoline-powered car: doing the things that need to be done each day exhausts me. I start out with lots of energy but gradually "run out of gas." I am "drained" by the work, and eventually feel "burned out," "out of steam," "burned up," even "toxic." I need time off, sleep, time away, vacations, sabbaticals, and yes, these retreats, to recuperate and "tune up."

But the solar-powered car runs on a renewable source of power, energy derived from the sun. It stores energy in its batteries for times when the sun is not shining. The owner of the solar-powered car takes it out of the garage in the morning with just enough power to back it out into the sun and to open up its solar panels so that it can begin to accumulate energy. The driver then drives the car around all day doing the things that need to be done, all the while storing up energy until finally its batteries are fully recharged. When she brings it home at the end of the day, there is certain to be enough stored energy to last through the night until the next morning.

There are times when, as a physician, I operate like a solar-powered car. At those times, even though I am busy all day long doing the things that need to be done, I seem to derive energy from my work. I feel "energized" or "fed" by the work. Naturally, I still require sleep, vacations, sabbaticals, and these retreats, but not with the same sense of desperation.

Of course, I'd really like it if I could more often be solar-powered, if the work more often fed me instead of exhausting me.

Part of the reason for this is that, even though the sun disappears behind the clouds, I know that it's still there, that it will be back. The *Tao Te Ching* says, "When the clouds pass, the sun shines through."[1] Even when the sun sinks below the horizon, I have confidence that it will be back the next day: "the sun born over and over."[2]



Malcolm Willett

Of course, the metaphor of the physician as a solar-powered car raises some difficult questions for me. Where, in my work, in my life, do I find this source of energy? How do I open my "solar panels"? How do I renew and save my energy? How do I "recharge my batteries"?

In my work, these things supply me with energy: learning, writing, teaching, mentoring, caring for patients, and working with the dying.

These things give me meaning and count as the sunny hours: "I count only the sunny hours" is the motto on a sundial near Venice.[3]

In my life, too, these things help to open me up: connection with family and friends, meditation, reading, listening to music, exercise, and yes, these retreats. It strikes me that what really matters about the retreats is the chance to spend time in silence and to be still, to do nothing. In the charting room on the ward at Hopkins where I trained, there was posted the Buddhist adage: "Don't just do something, sit there!" Our time on the porch together yesterday was this "do nothing" kind of experience.

Much of my week of retreat is spent in silence, in reading, writing, and walking in the woods; some of this time is spent in becoming still, in bird-watching, meditating, looking at the stars.

I recently met Father Robert Beloin, the chaplain from Yale University, and in our conversation he told me that he divides life into 4 quadrants: cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual. Clearly, my life as a physician is concentrated on the first 3, the cognitive, emotional, and physical domains. One of the reasons I keep coming back here to the Abbey is to spend some time and energy in the fourth, the spiritual, domain.

It is perhaps for this reason that this week is such a precious time to me, a time that I look forward to all the rest of the year and carry with me in some sense every day when I am back at work. Here in Oregon, there is time to reassess where I have been and where I am going, as a physician and as a person.

There is time simply to enjoy the woods. The day before you arrived, I went for a meandering hike up a small mountain across the road from the retreat center. I started the hike in valley fog and light mist, but when I got to the top of the hill, I was rewarded with a clear and spectacular view across the Willamette River valley. During the hike, I had time to think about the things that have happened and are happening to me, the things I've found most difficult.

There is time to deal with the "boundary situations" that have occurred in my own life: the death of David, my son; my brother John's devastating stroke and his subsequent hospitalizations; the prolonged illness and eventual death of my mother; the suicide of one of my residents; my father's recent diagnosis of cancer.

Finally, there is also a wonderful sense of reconnection each year to the monks—these remarkable men—who live and work in this special place. I have had a series of extended conversations (an hour or 2 each year over many years now) with several of them, and they have become friends as well as counselors. It's also becoming increasingly apparent that we are all growing old—and facing many of the same issues—together.[4]

These retreats help to "throw the windows of my soul wide open to the sun."[5]

To return to the metaphor, my friend Margaret Mohrmann has written thoughtfully about where we might find enough energy to do our work as clinicians.[6] She says first that we who care for those who are ill, those who suffer, must give of ourselves—our knowledge, our time, our passion, our strength—without stint. We must give exuberantly and extravagantly; there is no stinginess, no holding back, in such service.

"Does this mean," she asks, "that we are to spend all our time at the hospital, all our time visiting and caring for the sick? By no means." Those who suffer are not the only ones we are called on to care for. Our families, our friends, and our own selves also have compelling claims on our time and energy. We are, after all, only finite human beings who live in time and who must learn how to manage the time we have. However, she says, we must not accept the notion that if we spend our time and energy on those who suffer, there will be little or nothing left for the others we love. To mix a metaphor, this is not a "zero sum game."

Having said this, John, I must admit that there are many times when I find myself drained, when I feel that I literally have no more to give.

Mohrmann says there are 2 things to consider about this experience of feeling drained. First, it is easy to mistake fatigue for emptiness. The tasks of figuring out what, when, and how to give—and then doing so—are physically and mentally exhausting. We must learn to manage our limited energy as well as our finite time. But being too tired to keep giving is not the same as being empty; being drained of energy is not the same as apathy.

Then again, we may really be so drained that we don't care, that we feel we truly have nothing left to give. This happens when we have stopped receiving. This can happen for any number of reasons. We may not have found time for those things we need to do to care for ourselves, for the time we need to spend alone, to open ourselves up. We may not have made time for connection to family and friends who love us. Or, perhaps most relevantly to the work itself, we may have closed ourselves off from the gifts that come from the sick people whom we serve.

Mohrmann says, "Replenishing the self we pour out each day in love and service is not exactly like filling a car's gas tank. It is not so much that we expend the love in one

place—in the office, the hospital, the nursing home—and then go somewhere else—home, a friend's house, a quiet place—to get refueled." Rather, the energy is replenished right on the spot, in a continuous, reciprocal process of giving and receiving. This refueling can happen during the process of expenditure and can be provided by the one to whom we are giving, by the sick person we are working to heal.

I shared this metaphor with my residents at dinner the other night. I told them that what will please me the most in the years ahead will be seeing them operating as if solar-powered, being energized or fed by their work.

Of course, my hope for us all is that we can continue to find the things that supply us with energy, the experiences that help to open us up, find what we need to care for ourselves, to stay connected to our family and friends, and yes, find in the work itself the gifts that come from the sick people whom we serve.

Again, let me say how great it was to see you yesterday, John. I am already looking forward to a chance to reconnect with you again at the SGIM meeting in Boston in early May. Until then,
Be well,

Steve

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References

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